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ABSTRACT

As a result of an effective feminist movement and effective technological developments, men are faceing drastic and dramatic changes in their personal and work lives. Consequently, more men, and specifically more older men, are entering psychotherapy than ever before. Men in their 50's are facing problems associated with shifts away from traditional roles. Men in their 40's are facing problems associated with shared financial responsibilities in second marriages, and men in their 30's are dealing with lifestyle problems and career changes. In general, young men appear more committed to relationships than ever before and more willing to work on their mutually satisfying development. Therapy in the context of the relationship can be most helpful in providing opportunities for growth and self-understanding in which the directed exploration of problem areas can be pursued with the significant people involved. (Several case studies are given to illustrate the changes that are discussed.) (BL)

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MEN AND RELATIONSHIPS IN THE '80's

Mathilda B. Canter

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I've been a practicing psychotherapist for 20 years - give or take a few 50 minute hours - and in that time have worked with a goodly number of men: old men, young men, fear-of-middle-aged men, straight men, gay men, single and related men. And over the past 10 years, thanks to a great deal of involvement in APA and other professional activities, I've had the opportunity to talk with countless colleagues from all around the country about their work and the kinds of problems being presented to them by their clients/patients.

When Herb Freudenberger said to me, "How about doing a program for APA on what's happening to men in the 80's, my reaction was "Great!" I had some immediate off-the-top-of-my-head observations to make, and the commitment made it necessary to do some directed thinking and organization of ideas on the subject. I would like to share with you some of that thinking.

It seems to me that, as a result of an effective feminist movement, there have occurred some drastic and dramatic changes in the ways that women have come to be in their world...and that these changes have had tremendous impact on the men with whom they - we - live and work and share this world. It seems to me that, as a result of effective technological development, there have occurred some drastic and dramatic changes in the ways that men are having to deal with their world of work. It seems to me that the political, economic, and social upheavals in our society have all resulted in multi-faceted stresses which have catapulted many men - men of **all** ages - into psychological distress, self-doubt, anger, and depression. Many of these stresses have to do with their significant relationships, and I shall direct my attention there.

I am not suggesting, let me assure you, that the changes begun in the 60's and '70's are necessarily destructive. Today, we are addressing the problems being seen in **psychotherapy**, rather than the changes that have been incorporated by men in their relationships, that have led to increased personal growth and satisfaction, closeness, understanding, and the exercising of a wider range of choices for themselves.

We instruct parents to set limits for their children, and tell them that those limits will help their children to feel more secure and to pursue their developmental tasks more effectively. For us as adults, too, limits can be security-generating. Clearly, one of the sources of anxiety in our culture is the loss of limits implicit in traditional roles in a broad range of relationships. Increases in the number of choices open to men - and women - today, in terms of the roles they embrace as parents, spouses, friends, and lovers, involve increased decision making and increased complexity of those decisions. While anxiety may well be generated because of this, it is important to note that anxiety is not synonymous with dysfunction. Moderate amounts of anxiety may help us to generate important positive changes. It is those suffering from severe, disruptive anxiety who tend to come to see us in therapy.

Early in the '80's, I began to see men - and couples - who were and are presenting problems relating to shifts away from traditional male/female roles. What was different from the situations we have been observing and dealing with in therapy for many years now - ever since early in the feminist movement - has been (1)the age of the individuals concerned, (2)the fact that the person first coming for help has been the male, and (3) that many of the men have been individuals for whom psychological dysfunction is a new and surprising experience.

I have been seeing men in their 50's and 60's, men who have been married for 25, 30 or more years. For the most part, the women in their lives - their wives have, in a sense, finally "caught up" with the rest of the culture. That is, having been in traditional roles frequently as housewives and mothers with primary responsibility for raising the children and caring for their husbands, they have, after their nests emptied, finally entered the world of work, gone back to school, or developed new interests of other types reaching beyond the home. The resulting changes have sent shock waves through their relationships. The husbands, some of whom were, at first, very supportive of their wives' attempts to create something new for themselves, soon find that the changes are becoming more pervasive , more fundamental, than they anticipated, and the problems, for them begin!

Let me give you an example: Jack, age 57, was referred to me by his internist, who had observed that problems in his marriage were putting him under great stress, and recommended some psychological intervention. Jack presented himself as anxious and depressed, and attributed all of his problems to the changes in his wife. As he told it, he and Katherine had been married for 37 years, had six adult children, and many grandchildren. Always a "good provider" and "a family man," he took his responsibilities seriously, and loved his wife and children dearly. When he traveled, which he often did in the past, he never "strayed," (as he put it),always called home to make sure everything was all right, and always kept his trips as short as they could be. He stated that he was very much in love with Katherine still, and all he wanted was her happiness. About a year before he consulted me, his wife, with his encouragement, had applied for a job as an office worker. Much to her surprise, though not to his, she was

hired! He described her as very bright, a quick learner, and a person who had always been an excellent housekeeper, an efficient budget manager - in sum, a very capable woman. His confidence in her abilities was validated by her success. She **loved** working, did very well at it, and the money, though not necessary for their survival, provided some pleasant extras. And her hours were such that she was always home when Jack was. And then, she earned a promotion to the management level, and after his first burst of pride, trouble set in for Jack. Katherine's responsibilities increased, her time commitments at the office increased, and for the first time in all of their years together, Jack found himself at home without her. He missed her. Occasionally, she had to travel. First, he missed her. Then he started worrying about her/ And, for obvious reasons, every reassurance she gave him of her ability to take care of herself seemed to make him more anxious and more depressed. He denied that he wanted her to quit working and stay home. Intellectually, he subscribed to her right to work if that gave her pleasure. He simply wanted her to cut out the traveling....an essential part of her job.

When I saw Katherine, she stated that she was on the rocky edge of leaving Jack, because she was unwilling to accede to his demands and did not believe that he would be satisfied with anything less than "the old way": her life revolving around him, her always being available to him, and her "needing" him for financial and other support...the total dependency on him that had been true for her both psychologically and financially in the past. From Jack's point of view, he had created his own monster - and his anger at Katherine was compounded by his anger at himself for so doing! Katherine's role shifts coincided, in time, with Jack's heightening awareness of his own aging, some dimunition in his sexual capacities, and his fear of an early demise based on family statistics and health problems that he was experiencing. And Katherine's upward progress along a career path was in sharp contrast to Jack's situation, for he had had to cut back on his responsibilities, and was employed in a lower status job than that in which he had functioned for many years before.

The traditional roles to which Katherine had been raised and by which she had lived so long were too firmly entrenched for her to reject - or even modify - while her children were home and, as she saw it, needing her. It was only when they were gone, and time hung heavy on her hands, that she felt free even to **consider** an added role for herself. As her self-confidence increased and her experiences of success began to override her self-doubts, she was unwilling to accede to Jack's demands, as she had generally done before. A significant power struggle was under way, and the future of their relationship was hanging in the balance. While rigidity does not necessarily go along with aging, it does play a role in many instances. And for Jack, his fears moved him to become more and more rigid in his clinging to what was past and what had been good for him. He was feeling unneeded, threatened by the loss of his role as sole provider, caretaker,

and acknowledged head of the household. As Katherine asserted herself and functioned more independently, Jack feared that she would discover that she did not need him, and that she would leave him because he was no longer the man he had been. Each trip she took, each time she was away from him, became symbolic of that impending loss, and his resultant agitation and depression served to exacerbate his self-disdain and provide evidence for him of her impending desertion. One of the significant problems for him -and for other men I have seenof late, was the discrepancy between his intellectual commitment to Katherine's right to do what she was doing, and his emotional incapacity to make the necessary adjustments.

Jack and Katherine's dilemmas are shared to greater or lesser degree by other couples in their age group and lower middle-class subculture, and may be anticipated until such time as we run out of marriages of long standing with traditional roles deeply embedded in them.

I am seeing some couples in their 40's whose problems revolve around the sharing of financial responsibilities. Frequently they are in second marriages, where they have had prior experiences of the male as sole breadwinner, but the economic and financial realities do not permit this to continue. For these men, separation of self-worth from earning power, and broadening of the basis for experiencing of self as adequate are a necessary part of the psychotherapy. And the implications of the earning partnership for the relationship, and the ways in which finances are handled need to be spelled out clearly.

I am seeing men in their 30's and 40's who have managed to cope with technological changes and social upheavals, who have established primary relationships that work - two-career relationships, relationships involving shared parenting - relationships between caring individuals. I see some of these men because they come for help in dealing with their relationships with their **parents** - parents who disapprove of their life styles, parents who are demanding, dependent, and having difficulty accepting adult children's choices. And I see some of these **parents**, who come for help in coping too, frequently feeling that since the dads are not the obviously followed models for their sons' ways of living, they have somehow failed and experience guilt along with their anger and bewilderment.

I also see young men who are comfortable with flexible roles in their own primary relationships, but have trouble in dealing with changes in the life styles and roles of their fathers and their mothers. The double standard of earlier days is now being seen applied inter-generationally: it's OK for me and my peers, but not OK for my parents and their peers!

We hear often, these days, of the fathers exercising their newly attained rights to be custodial parents. I am seeing some of the flip side of this - the father who prefers **not** to be the custodial parent, and who no longer can deny his wish and gracefully

shed the responsibility by acceding to the "mother's right" to the children. I see some men having to confront some of these issues. I see men having difficulty in parenting their children because of discomfort and guilt around sharing with their children their lifestyles as single adults.

Some of the problems I am hearing about from men in their 30's and 40's relate to career changes. Where new technologies and shifts in marketability and supply and demand dictate such changes, we frequently are seeing anxiety, fear of change, and feelings of inadequacy and failure. But when the wish to make career changes is a function of personal choice motivated by the search for fulfillment, such changes are frequently met with resistance on the part of partners, parents, and even peers. In therapy, it becomes important to explore realistically the possible consequences and costs of such choices, so that personal growth is not undermined.

I recall a case shared with me by a colleague, in the early '70s, involving a successful physician who came to therapy depressed, dissatisfied with his life, and feeling trapped in a situation growing increasingly aversive day by day. In treatment, he thought through the issues, gave up his profession, and went into a business which gave him the opportunity to express some of his artistic, creative talents. His family was aghast. His wife filed for divorce. His parents were devastated. He expected that. Even his friends were shocked, apprehensive for him, and disapproving. I compare his experience with that of a lawyer I was seeing recently, who decided to leave his profitable practice and get involved in a rather atraditional, but potentially very satisfying enterprise. His family was aghast. His parents were devastated. His wife was all for the change, but his children would have filed for divorce if they could have.....Even his friends, despite lip service to freedom of choice and self-actualization, were sending slightly covert but clearly disapproving messages.....Change comes slowly!

Generally, with relationships, comes a loss of degrees of freedom, a loss for which we are compensated by having important needs met. When partners do **not** consider our needs important, and our needs are **not** met, our relationships tend to founder and, in the last decade or so, to be abandoned. Some years ago, in an APA presentation examining some of the reasons for the frequent breakup of relationships, I talked about what I considered one of the principal contributing factors: namely, the total egocentricity involved in the focus on **ME** within the context of the primary relationship. When the roles of women in these relationships were, earlier, changed in some rather revolutionary ways, the role expectations of men underwent significant changes as well. With no new models to follow, and with traditional models as contrasts, many men, with frequent histories of having been raised to be important and empowered, responded with anger, anxiety, frustration, dashed hopes, and deeply felt isolation and alienation. The breakup

of these relationships frequently involved, for men, strong feelings of failure, and a desperate search for a new partner to dull that pain and prove to him his lovability - and his worth. A vicious circle, and one frequently involving substance abuse to avoid dealing with some of the basic problems. And speaking of substance abuse, one of the problems presenting itself in relationships today concerns substance abuse by one partner, generally the male, whose wife or lover is no longer or never was a user, and who is distressed by the effects of the abuse on the user and on the quality of their relationship.

In Arizona, where I live and work, I recently read a news report indicating that there has been a **decrease** in the divorce rate in the state! Startling news! Of course, there may be many many factors contributing to this statistic. But one of them at least, I believe, ties in with something I have been observing recently. And that is, a shift from a **ME** to a **WE** focus in the primary relationships of our young adults. This shift appears to be largely attributable to a growing awareness on the part of **women** that concern for others is **not** incompatible with self respectfulness, and that free choice need not be hedonistic but can, in fact, even involve the election of options with some negative characteristics in order to facilitate a particular consequence of importance to a significant person in one's life.

Relationship dyads with one "giver" and one "taker" frequently founder when the "giver" finally realizes that he or she is never going to "get." But when both are capable of giving and are willing to do so, relationships become viable. It is this change that, I believe, is starting to make the difference. In such relationships, I am not seeing, in the men, the rage which I used to see, sometimes openly expressed and sometimes thinly disguised, sometimes somatized, sometimes presenting as depression. Earlier, the lip service paid to needing to work on relationships was frequently just that - lip service. And the relationship ended because it was no fun to live with a depressed person, or someone who was sick, or angry, or otherwise interfering with the pursuit of pleasure.

The young men I am seeing now tend to be committed to their relationships and more willing to work on them than earlier. In the past, when heterosexual relationships were troubled, it was usually the woman who came for help, and the male frequently offered his services as a "consultant," so to speak, willing to help **her** with **her problem.** Today, more and more frequently, it is the men who are coming in for help, who are feeling more vulnerable and stressed. Perhaps because the women are less dependent and therefore potentially more likely to leave if the relationship does not please them. The shift in the balance of power is becoming more clear.

The old issues of sex-linked household chores and dual careers once so commonly heard in the therapist's office no longer seem

to hold the same emotional charge for most of the young men I see. They seem to have come to terms with the idea of shared responsibilities for the nitty-gritty of daily living. More and more, however, I am seeing situations in which "love is not enough," situations in which interpersonal skills have not been appropriately developed, and it is as though the whole process of socialization, stunted earlier, must be helped to continue. The frequently seen inability of young men to sustain an intimate relationship appears to come out of a fundamental lack of trust in women, and, most important, a lack of trust in self. The difficulty involved in establishing one's identity in a world in which everything is changing, where there are fewer and fewer guideposts than ever, where there are lots of minefields, where hard work doesn't insure success, and where you can't even count on justice somewhere down the line...the difficulty in establishing an identity under these conditions is great, indeed.

Therapy in the context of the relationship can be most helpful by providing opportunities for self-understanding and growth in which the directed exploration of problem areas can be pursued with the significant people involved. The opportunities for support and cooperation, for uncovering problem elements and for working out solutions is maximized when the significant figures in the troubled relationship are actively engaged in the therapy.

The clock moves on inexorably, and my allotted time is over. I hope that you will, in the discussion to follow the presentations, share your observations and experiences as psychologists concerned with the problems of men in today's world.